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"Protecting Animal and Public Health: Homeland Security and the Federal Veterinarian Workforce"

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WASHINGTON, DC - Senator Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, held a hearing to examine the results of a Government Accountability Office (GAO) review of the Federal veterinarian workforce.

## Chairman Akaka's opening statement appears below.

I call this hearing of the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia to order. I want to welcome our witnesses. Thank you for being here today. Today's hearing – *Protecting Public and Animal Health: Homeland Security and the Federal Veterinarian Workforce* – will examine the results of a Government Accountability Office review of the Federal veterinarian workforce. The Federal veterinarian workforce is on the front lines in ensuring our homeland security, public health, and food safety. In total, there are over 3,000 veterinarians working in the Federal government. Their role is especially critical in the areas of disease prevention and response.

Although we are not facing a major disease outbreak in the United States right now, we must remain vigilant. About 75 percent of newly emerging infectious diseases originate in animals. One example of this type of zoonotic disease is avian influenza. According to the World Health Organization, the H5N1 strain of avian influenza has led to over 250 human fatalities in about 400 known cases – over a 60 percent fatality rate. This outbreak has occurred overseas, but we should remember that diseases do not respect international borders and may prove difficult to control.

Our livestock and food supply also could be endangered by animal diseases. The 2001 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in the United Kingdom led to the slaughter of more than 4 million animals and cost the British agricultural and food sectors over 5 billion dollars. Some experts believe that a similar foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in the United States could reduce agricultural income by over 14 billion dollars.

I requested that GAO undertake a comprehensive review of the Federal veterinarian workforce because I was concerned that our nation's homeland security, public health, and food safety may be harmed by the growing shortage of veterinarians. Unfortunately, GAO's report suggests that these concerns are well founded. This hearing today provides us an opportunity to assess the state of this crucial workforce and ways to improve it.

I would like to highlight a number of the issues that concern me in particular, which I hope our witnesses will address. GAO has listed strategic human capital management on its high-risk series since 2001. It is unclear why agencies, departments, and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) have not taken more steps to address the causes of human capital challenges in such a critical part of the Federal workforce. Direct-hire authority is not enough. Strategic workforce planning through a collaborative, ongoing process to anticipate and resolve critical workforce challenges among Federal agencies, with the support of OPM, would be a better approach.

There is a pressing need to address Federal veterinarian workforce shortages. The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) has a 15 percent veterinarian shortfall. Some veterinarians in this agency are assigned to multiple slaughter plants and have voiced their concerns that they cannot always meet their responsibilities – such as sanitation and food safety checks – and perform high-quality work.

Although FSIS is using recruitment bonuses and internships to attempt to lower its vacancy rates, this is not a comprehensive approach to the problem. Due to unpleasant work conditions at slaughterhouses and their remote locations, along with limited professional development opportunities and lower pay, FSIS has difficulty attracting and retaining veterinarians.

A lack of comprehensive human capital planning also leads to competition for veterinarians between agencies, even within the same department. For instance, according to GAO, many FSIS inspectors move to the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) within the U.S. Department of Agriculture for greater pay and more appealing work. According to APHIS, 17 percent of their veterinarian hires over a recent four-year period were from FSIS.

A wave of Federal veterinarian retirements may worsen these workforce challenges. More than one fourth of the veterinarians at key agencies for public health and food safety will be eligible to retire within three years. In sum, the shortage of Federal veterinarians and lack of comprehensive planning to address the shortage require immediate, sustained, and focused attention.

A significant, related challenge is the ability of the Federal veterinarian workforce to perform its responsibilities during a crisis, including a pandemic or foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. GAO found that four of the key agencies that would likely be involved in a response, including APHIS, the Agricultural Research Service, FSIS, and the Food and Drug Administration, lack pandemic plan elements that the Federal Emergency Management Agency deems necessary.

Additionally, a foot-and-mouth disease or other major disease outbreak could require a widespread effort among veterinarians to slaughter or vaccinate affected animals. Any delays in responding could aggravate the crisis.

The Federal and state responses to recent zoonotic outbreaks raised some concerns. According to GAO, 12 of the 17 agencies involved in responding to four outbreaks did not have an adequate workforce to handle these crises while continuing with their routine activities. Yet many of the agencies did not undertake post-outbreak assessments of their responses. If all the agencies involved took the time to collaborate and capture their lessons learned, especially concerning how their workforces were affected, they could take proactive actions to reduce the severity of future outbreaks.

I look forward to hearing more about the issues affecting the Federal veterinarian workforce. We should not wait for another homeland security, public health, or food safety crisis to begin to address this problem.

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